



Speech & Language Disorders  
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Hello. My name is Carole Wymer, Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at the University of Arizona. I am a clinically trained and certified Speech Language Pathologist and a member of the Talking Matters team. In this module, I will be talking about speech and language disorders. You will learn the definitions of speech and language, common types of associated disorders and characteristics that may signal concern.

We know that most typically developing children learn language in predictable stages – and at predictable ages. But within these predictable ages and stages, there is a wide range of variability. Every child develops at a unique pace. So, you will want to keep track of your own child’s development, and, with the help of this video, be ready to ask your pediatrician - or a speech-language pathologist who specializes in early childhood development - any questions or concerns you may have about the development of your child’s speech and language.

Let’s begin by describing speech and language and common types of related disorders:

Speech is the production of individual sounds, put together to form words. Children learn the distinctive sounds of their language gradually and learn to combine them according to the rules, or patterns, they hear from the moment they are born. Babies listen to all the sounds around them and to every sound you make, and soon begin to recognize frequently occurring sound combinations called words. By their first birthday, your child will say their very first words and by age four, most speaking children will produce nearly all sounds correctly and will be understood by most everyone around them.

Language is a combination or system of symbols used to convey ideas and understand others.

There really are two parts to it – receptive language and expressive language. Receptive language represents what we understand, while expressive language represents what we can say or express in words, phrases, sentences.

When talking is hard for a child, they may be experiencing a speech sound or articulation disorder. They may have difficulty producing one or many different sounds or sound combinations. Family members or friends may have difficulty understanding their speech or refer to it as “baby talk”. A child may leave out a sound or substitute one sound for another. This may not be cause for concern, but could be if it persists past the age when they would be expected to produce such sounds correctly.

Other children who have difficulty talking may repeat sounds, words or phrases when they speak. Or they may have a hard time getting words out and take long pauses between their words. You may also notice a tense neck, face or shoulders when they try to talk. When these behaviors persist and distract the listener, they may signal a stuttering or fluency disorder.

An unusual voice quality such as hoarseness or breathiness or using a very loud or soft voice might indicate a voice disorder.

If a child has difficulty expressing ideas or needs, they may be reluctant to talk or become easily frustrated. This may signal an expressive language disorder. Or you might hear your child confusing the pronouns him and her, for example, a child might say “him hit me.” or they may frequently use vague words, like stuff or thing instead of specific labels. This could be cause for concern if other more specific words are not used at all.

When a child frequently has difficulty following directions or understanding what others are saying, they may be showing signs of a receptive language disorder. They may hear or see a word but not understand its meaning. It’s important to note that these symptoms may be mistakenly identified as poor listening, poor attention, (selective hearing) or bad behavior.

Children with speech and language difficulties often express their frustration with communicating through physical aggression or other disruptive behavior that may lead to poor relationships with peers or siblings and reluctance to attend school. Speech and language disorders frequently occur together so a child may be demonstrating a combination of several problems. Concerned family members may notice the child struggling and offer well intentioned advice that as a parent you may consider intrusive, but if you sense something is different about your child’s speech or language development and others have shared concern, it is probably time to seek help identifying whether or not a disorder is present.

There are many different causes of speech and language disorders including hearing loss, brain injury, or physical impairments to name just a few. But most of the time the cause of speech and language disorders are unknown. By the time children are ready to start kindergarten, critical speech and language development has occurred. Well intentioned advice from family, friends or even your pediatrician to “wait and see” if a child’s communication improves without any intervention, could have lasting negative effects. Speech and language abilities lay the foundation for reading and writing

success. Children with communication disorders may struggle with reading, writing stories or essays, misunderstanding social cues and have difficulty taking tests. This can have a lasting impact on attitudes about school and participation in life-long learning. Communication skills are critical for a normal, productive life. Left untreated, a communication disorder can have a life-long effect on social development, interpersonal relationships, the ability to learn, and on ultimate independence.

Some of the characteristics, or red flags commonly associated with speech and language disorders that I have briefly mentioned here may be short-lived, and may signify only a fleeting developmental blip. But if they persist or worsen, they could indicate difficulties that require professional evaluation and intervention. Early intervention has been shown to have a significant impact on a child's speech and language development. It improves their ability to communicate, interact with others, and improves social and emotional development. So when you have concerns, to ensure that your child is correctly assessed, it is important to receive a thorough evaluation by a certified speech-language pathologist.

A certified speech-language pathologist will help you sort out whether or not a disorder is present and, if so, what you can do to get your child the right treatment.

Evaluation and therapy services for preschool children (ages 3 through 5) are provided free of charge through the public school system. These services, available through a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, also make available early intervention for children birth to five and services for school age children.

If you are concerned about your child's speech and language development please click on the Learn More section of this module for a link to resources that will put you in touch with a speech-language pathologist in your area. Also on our website are answers to frequently asked questions about how children develop speech and language but if you have questions or concerns that aren't answered there, please call us on the TALK Line.

And remember to take time to talk to your children everyday about the things that matter to you and to them, because talking matters.

Thank you for watching!

